

SERMON for the 5th SUNDAY after the EPIPHANY (A)
1st Presbyterian Church, Bemidji
Matthew 5:13-20

SALT

Jesus' figures of speech generally cut two ways. On one hand they offer the blessings of God's kingdom, and on the other, they hold forth the responsibility that the blessing entails. "You are the salt of the earth; ... but if the salt has lost its taste it is worthless."

Salt: It's pretty common stuff, if you have access to a grocery store. It comes in a round paper box with a little tin spout. I know just how much to pour out into the hollow of my hand to make the oatmeal taste just right. Salt, in just the right amount, is necessary to our health, but too much is bad for us. Because it is necessary for human life, salt has had an important place in history. Books have been written about it. Salt is so common in the daily pattern of our lives that we take it for granted, except when it isn't handy on the table, or when it gets hard in the shaker.

It wasn't always that way, and it isn't that way everywhere right now. It wasn't that way when Jesus was teaching the people of Galilee. It prompts a question. "Just where did the people of those Galilean villages get their salt, and what did it look like?" You can bet that it didn't come in round paper boxes with tin spouts.

June and I and our five sons lived for three years in Nigeria, on the southern coast of West Africa. I was a visiting professor at a new university which was located in a fairly remote part of the country. The university campus was surrounded by bush villages, and in the village markets there were salt traders (salt sellers?). The salt came in round gray-brown balls, about the size of a softball. The salt was scraped up from salty soil where it had leached out of underground deposits; so it was about half dirt –quite literally, "the salt of the earth." And it behaved just as Jesus said. It could collect moisture and mingle salt with earth in a way that made it useless – no different than the ordinary dirt underfoot. I have to believe that the salt Jesus talked about was very like that.

Jesus' marvelous metaphor, drawn from the common and ordinary things of life, serves to describe the church as he intended it to be. It is as ordinary and universal as salt: the salt that, mixed with common earth, performs a marvelous and mysterious chemistry. Where it appears, where it is put to use, it makes a difference far beyond its proportion in the mix.

The point is hard to miss. Jesus was speaking to people who regarded themselves as God's people. And he was speaking in that inclusive plural that means, "all of you," like southerners say, "You all." He was speaking to that cadre of believers who would be a tiny minority in the civilization of they were a part, but they would change that civilization forever. They would send fire upon the earth.

But there was that second clause to the message, the gentle warning signal, the "But if . . ." But if the heart and essence of the thing is lost, the spirit that gives life to the enterprise -- if that is lost, what was effective and transformative becomes dull and ordinary, "fit only to be trodden under foot."

Fast-forward two thousand years: Jesus was speaking to the Church that bears his name. The church is the people of God, gathered in the name of Jesus Christ. The church is where a distinctive quality of life is nurtured, where the good is exalted and beauty treasured, where Christ's love leads to a mutual regard for one another, where God is worshiped and served with, energy and ardor of spirit. This distinctive quality of life is discovered, not by becoming more formally religious, but by demonstrating in action that the work is God's work, and the energy that drives it is the spirit of God.

Most of all, the church is Christ's church whenever and wherever the people of God serve this needy world or this needy city in the name of Jesus Christ. God sent his Son into the world as its servant Lord. He came to call together a servant people. The last thing Jesus wanted was to make us more religious. He was crucified, after all, by people who loved religion. His charter for the church is that it should be the servant of the world, alert to every opportunity to do so, beginning in the very shadow of the church building; in the world, valuing, appreciating, loving and serving. In that is the incarnation of God, and the expression of God's power. The point is to make a difference: to change the family, the community, the culture, the world.

Jesus also used that other example, also a two-edged one. "You are the light of the world. Don't hide it! Let it be seen, so that everyone knows that God is at work here."

Don't forget that the spiritual energy is God's energy and power of Christ's presence with us. The church finds its identity and its vitality most deeply and expansively when it gathers around the Lord's Table in the Sacrament Christ gave us -- the sacrament we shall soon celebrate. We Presbyterians tend to be a bit

casual about our Communion service and we need to liven the sense of its holiness. We need to recognize the breadth and depth and height of its meaning, and sense that present with us are all the beloved saints in every time and place, those who came before us, and who will come after. Then let the grace of this Holy Communion make us one body, one spirit in Christ, that with courage and vigor and joy we may worthily serve the world in his name. Amen.